



*Sen. Bernie Sanders Fourth Annual*

# **State of the Union Essay Contest**

## A House Divided

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2013 was a difficult year for America. Nature brought death and disaster by fire, wind, and water; four prominent banks used unethical methods to deprive Americans of their homes; numerous individuals, businesses, and the city of Detroit hit financial rock bottom; and shootings in our schools every other week killed 19 and wounded 24 students and staff. A spy revealed that our government is spying on our private conversations; universal healthcare became a universal headache when the application process required major surgery; and an exciting finish exploded into terror at the Boston Marathon. But Americans are resilient and resolute. Oklahoma is rebuilding and Detroit is reorganizing. Many Americans have healthcare for the first time and dozens of Boston's runners finished their race in the Shires of Vermont Marathon. Americans weathered the tragedies of 2013 with the same determination, innovation, and cooperation that has enabled us to overcome depressions, recessions, wars, and disasters in the past, we pull up our boot straps, plant our feet firmly in the direction of progress, and extend a helping hand to those in need.

Tragically, there was one disaster that the American people could not overcome in 2013, a Congress so dysfunctional that it could not even manage to operate the government for the entire year. And our expectations were not high to begin with. A Gallup poll conducted in January 2013 found that Americans rank Congress lower in popularity than root canals and cockroaches and rate Congressmen lower in ethics and honesty than used car salesmen. Instead of employing collaboration and compromise, our leaders indulged in backstabbing and finger pointing. Rather than seeking common ground to find solutions to the problems facing our country, our elected representatives nitpicked and cherry picked and attacked each other's intentions and integrity to boost their personal prospects for fundraising and reelection. The spectacle of Tea Party Republicans posturing for the press while the government crashed and burned lacked only a violin accompaniment to rival Nero's folly.

The 113th Congress was the least productive legislature in our history, passing only fifty-five bills into law. Public approval of Congress sank from a "high" of 18% on January 1, 2013 to a current low of 8%. In fact, "69% think no matter how bad things are, Congress can always find a way to make them worse (Rasmussen Reports)." We deserve better from our political leaders. We need Congressmen and Senators who will set aside personal gain and divisive ideology in order to build compromise and find consensus on the issues that challenge us: economic opportunity, income parity, gun control, immigration, stagnant academic achievement, climate change, and long-term deficit reduction.

Abraham Lincoln once observed that "a house divided cannot stand." Our House and Senate have splintered into partisan factions of squabbling inactivity. Americans will continue to soldier on, overcoming whatever obstacles impede our advancement. We can only hope that our Congressional leaders will acquire the maturity and wisdom to help rather than hinder our progress. But for now, we are a union without unity.

In our changing world today we face many challenges, not just in our country and individual regions, but throughout the globe. One of the main problems that could alter our world forever is climate change. Throughout the past century we have spewed hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which top scientists now unanimously agree is warming our world and causing extreme weather to become frighteningly common. Our planet has warmed 1.4° in the past one hundred years, and is projected to keep warming if we do not act soon. This warming is causing changing weather patterns that are drastically affecting our world. Flooding, fires, and tornadoes throughout the country and storms such as Tropical Storm Irene right here in Vermont show how the effects of climate change are hurting people everywhere. Even the small changes in my home town in Vermont are starting to add up, we have less snow, more green Christmases, and extreme summer storms. Floods are also becoming increasingly common. However, neither Vermont nor America are the only places that are being heavily affected by climate change. It is a global problem, and we have to think globally and work together in order to mend what we have done to our planet. Our world is beautiful and fragile, and we must put our energy to solving the problem of climate change before it is too late.

America has always been known as a place where individuals are both innovative and creative in order to solve problems. I believe that we can each take steps as individuals and as a country to reduce the carbon be released into the atmosphere. These steps include driving less, and carpooling more, replacing light bulbs for more energy efficient ones, being more conscious of where our food comes from, and recycling and composting as much as possible. We have seen over the past one hundred years that each of us have the power with our small, everyday choices do destroy earth's environment and natural balance. I believe that if we have been able to do that, then we each have the power with our small, everyday choices to change the earth's environment for the better. We must all make small changes in order to live a more sustainable lifestyle and lead the world in the right direction by being a country with a minimal carbon footprint.

We cannot put this issue off any longer. Now is the time to act, now is the time to put our differences aside and work together in the government and around the world to change the world for the better and protect our world for future generations. We must not be selfish about this problem by brushing it under the rug because it is easier that way, or in order to maintain our way of life. We must act now to make changes in the way we live in order to preserve this beautiful world for our future children and for generations to come.

### **Works Cited**

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Dear Senator Sanders,

The American Economy is currently in recovery from the worst recession to hit this nation since the great depression. This recession has left the American economy in disarray, specifically the American middle class. Stuck on median wages, the American middle class has been hit the hardest by the collapse of the infrastructure of the American economy.

In order to repair this monumental failure of our nation to recognize the middle class as valuable, we must begin to support Main Street America; local businesses. As a nation we tend to ignore the services, and products of local businesses in favor of the cheaper alternatives offered by billion dollar conglomerates. If we, as a nation, can ever hope to change, we must be willing to sacrifice. This phenomenon is responsible for the gradual disappearance of Main Street America, and the lack of attention given to the American Middle Class.

With the ominous threats of climate change advancing, we are offered a second chance to strengthen the middle class. We must create sustainable energy sources, to put an end to global warming. To build our industrial foundation upon a new type of energy will create a surplus of jobs. These jobs must offer respectable wages, health care benefits, and opportunities for growth. If this is done effectively, we may be able to get the American middle class back on track, and simultaneously end the impending threats of global warming.

In order to allow our economy to recover from the recession, we must recognize the youth of America as our future. In doing so, we must stress upon implementing a better educational system to better engage the students, create more affordable collegiate education for the middle class. The middle class faces many challenges, yet are a cornerstone of the American economy. However, when attempting to send their children to college, the middle class faces yet another challenge. The wealthy are able to pay the college tuition, and the poor are given generous financial aid grants. However, the middle class is expected to pay thirty to fifty thousand dollars a year to send their kids to college, money which they don't have. This is unacceptable, and takes away a great deal of incentive for these kids to even attend college. Those who do attend college are leave with a degree, but are then faced with enormous amounts of student loans. Lastly, we must involve the youth in the workforce of America. Not only will this strengthen our workforce, but it will also provide the American youth with savings for college, and teach them the value of work.

As I previously stated, in order to change, we must be willing to sacrifice. We must be willing to sacrifice the allure of bargain brands to support a local brand. We must sacrifice our tendency towards gasoline to find more sustainable sources of energy. If we are truly willing to sacrifice, we will change.

In the world there are many issues that we need to address. There is poverty and debt, the circling case in which innocent people can't feed themselves or their families because they can't afford to, which in turn causes famine. Another problem is pollution, which destroys our environment by making it dirty and useless for future generations. Another problem is communication, a thing that most countries do not know how to do. All of these problems, every single one, could be solved by promoting sustainable development. Promoting sustainable development will help to make great leaps forward in solving world issues.

One way that promoting sustainable development will help to solve world problems is that it will help developing countries. Aiding the developing countries will prove extremely useful later on when we need help. This will give us the image that we are helpful and are there when other countries need us. Although this will cost a lot of money, it will become a large help later on if and when we're in trouble. Promoting sustainable development in developing countries will also increase peace throughout the world. If all the countries are helping each other out, meaning that we are sharing our information and products, then there will be little to no conflicts, and we can all be happy and get along. Not to mention that helping out other countries will heavily decrease poverty and famine, which will prevent the need for future U.S. aid and thus save us money, since that is what some people are more interested in. Clearly, promoting sustainable development will help to increase peace and equality and decrease poverty and famine.

Promoting sustainable development will definitely help to improve our image as a country. We will be looked at as a great role model and a powerful force with good intentions. The U.S. could be viewed as a gentle giant of sorts. This will improve our favor when it comes to disputes and it will also increase our ally count. Although that should not matter, we should be doing these things out of the goodness of our hearts, not expecting reward. We should not need to receive a reward for us to support the dying, the sick, and the poor. In conclusion, promoting sustainable development will improve our image so that we are looked at in a better light.

Promoting sustainable development will greatly reduce conflict over rare resources. One example of conflict over scarce resources is the U.S. and Iran over oil. Another is against the residents and loggers in South America over the Amazon Rainforest. This could all be avoided if we all shared our resources and promoted the use of sustainable development. Sustainable development would mean that we do not need to constantly deplete the Earth's resources. Sustainable development would mean that we come up with ways to fuel our economies with sources that will never run out! If the countries do work together to achieve that goal, then we will no longer have to fight over the sources that we need because we'll never run out of them.

Promoting sustainable development will help the world make great leaps forward in solving world issues. It will do this by helping developing countries develop in

economically and environmentally sound ways, improving the image of the U.S., and reducing disputes and fighting over rare resources. The solving of these problems will help bring about an era of peace over the world. Sustainable development will save Mother Earth from mutilation and destruction. The world will be a better place if everyone gets along and we all are working toward the same thing: the protection of our planet. Promoting sustainable development will make for a better world for all the generations to come.

Many United States issues have been the subject of attention from the media, citizens and officials. However, in my opinion the environmental issues in the US have not had their share of the spotlight. Small measures, whether involving policy or simple publicity, could change the US environment for the better. One of these measures is increased regulation of the fracking industry.

Hydraulic fracturing or "fracking" is the process of gathering oil by forcing highly pressurized fluid into oil or gas formations, so that the oil or gas flows to the surface. The use of fracking has jumped to 25% of oil production, up from 1% in 2000. It has spurred hopes of an energy independent United States, but there are many drawbacks, especially where the environment is concerned. Fracking endangers plants, livestock, and most importantly, human beings. Refusal or reluctance to crack down on the fracking industry could seriously harm the health of the United States and its people. We must not let ourselves be lured by the economic benefits of fracking, and instead must examine it closely to determine if energy independence is worth the risk.

Of the 750 chemicals that can be used in fracking fluid, 29 are carcinogens. In Wyoming, Pennsylvania and other states, these chemicals have contaminated drinking water in residential areas. If there is no way to change the chemical makeup of fracking fluid or legalize fracking completely, making sure the fracking industry is subject to strict regulation is the next best course of action.

Progress is being made, however. The FRAC (Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals) Act was introduced in 2011, which shows that the issue has caught the attention of Congress. However, both the House and Senate versions have yet to be passed. These bills need to be brought back to the attention of Congress, because as long as the fracking industry is not subject to the same regulation as every other, the natural environment and citizens of the United States will continue to be at risk.

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How a country collects and allocates its resources takes precedence in outlining the foundation of equality and general welfare. We as individuals rely on a revenue of both incomes and loans, which makes for a crude economic model of spending. This holds true for our government. As the nation dives deeper into debt and countries around the world experience protests and riots over austerity measures, it is clear that additional tax dollars are necessary to reduce debt, support society, and give rise to the economy.

Tax increases will put the definition of taxation back into its actuality. The United States tax rates are theoretically graduated by income level, meaning that lower income ranges pay a lower rate than higher income ranges. However, those in a higher tax bracket often have more deductions to further equalize their effective rate with that of the middle or lower brackets. A decline in tax rates for the most wealthy is a disproportionate advantage for the already financially capable members of our society, which further instigates the income disparities that threaten our democratic ideals. The top percent of Americans possesses more wealth than the entire bottom 90 percent; the 400 wealthiest Americans have a greater combined net worth than the entire bottom 150 million; and yet, everyone is paying a similar effective rate. Not everyone is currently contributing their fair share to society, and living in a nation with the largest amount of debt in the world, this matter of fact is unacceptable. Tax increases will make the theory of taxes a reality and restore economic equality.

Though our current fiscal path is unstable, increasing taxes will reduce national debt and put us on the right track back to recovery. With a 16 trillion dollar debt that is rising at the rate of 6 billion dollars a day (4 million dollars every minute), every family in America would owe about \$50,000 to various countries around the world if the burden trickled down to the general public. When the government needs money, it sells treasury bills (similar to savings bonds) to investors, who cash them in after an average of ten years for the original amount plus interest. Though a certain amount of debt is arguably helpful for the economy, consistently high deficits force the government to offer higher, more appealing interest rates; investors eventually realize that the country is unlikely to pay back the money it borrows and they stop lending, which crushes the economy, as most recently witnessed in Greece. Our current national debt is greater than the economies of the United Kingdom, Australia, and China, combined. Stopping this vicious economic cycle requires less foreign-reliance and more self-sustenance, which is feasible if and only if we increase taxes.

Tax increases will ensure the funding and availability of certain social programs and necessary expenditures on infrastructure without the need to excessively issue bonds. Taxes currently fund public services of insurance, such as Social Security and Medicare, of welfare, such as the Pell Grant and Food Stamp programs, and of infrastructure, such as the scholastic and interstate highway systems. Nobel laureate of economics Paul Krugman affirms a current necessity for increased taxes in his following statement:



[Regarding] proposals to raise the age of Medicare eligibility to 67... outlays would fall only by \$125 billion over the next decade... and even when fully phased in, this partial dismantling of Medicare would reduce the deficit only about a third as much as could be achieved with higher taxes on the very rich... don't believe anyone who claims otherwise.

Taxes pay for important programs that go unpaid by spending cuts. The Bureau of Economic Statistics reports that the average standard of living, determined by comparing adjusted incomes and poverty rates, has increased in years with a higher annual budget and decreased in years on the contrary. According to the New York Times and the Board of Economic Advisors, there is a direct correlation between the amount of money provided to the government in the national budget and the quality of life in the United States, as determined by the rate of poverty. This makes logical sense; our standard of life escalates as we make fiscal contributions to society. Yet we continue to have the lowest tax rate in the world. Taxes are imposed so that roads get fixed, so we get an education, and so people don't invade our country. Taxes are imposed to protect our rights. The government imposes taxes on us for our own benefit, and by raising them, we will improve the living conditions and quality of life in America.

Tax increases will lead to economic growth and prosperity. In 1990 and again in 1993, President Clinton enacted deficit-reduction legislation that raised taxes for high income taxpayers; as a result, economic growth and job creation were strong. Within this period of a sensational economy, capital gain rates were cut, and there was a 20% increase in job availability for a total of 21 million new jobs. However, after the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and the Bush Recession, job growth lagged behind GDP growth, there was 0% net job growth, and with continuous population growth, there were record high unemployment rates. Tax increases have helped society and the economy in the past, and they will help again.

In any case of regulatory action, the value to be upheld is the quality of life. By reducing debt, supporting society, and giving rise to the economy, the nation will better ensure a standard of well-being for its citizens. The government of these United States is to assure life, liberty, health, and happiness, in our pursuit of the American dream. Lincoln said it best in his Gettysburg Address: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." The prioritization of tax increases over spending cuts is essential to future policy in the United States of America to sustain the American public.

##

There are many issues facing the United States. Personally, I believe one of the most critical domestic issues is reproductive rights.

Every step back to pre-Roe v. Wade is sensationalized in the media, and rightfully so. The issue is much more far reaching than pro-life versus pro-choice; it is both a human rights issue and an economic issue.

Firstly, it is a human rights issue. It is a matter of women having control over their own decisions, their bodies, and their lives. Western women strive to liberate women who they view as oppressed, but these same western women don't realize that their freedoms are also disappearing. Women and men alike have the right to decide what happens to their bodies. Restricting access to contraception and health services violates this human right for both genders.

Secondly, it is an economic issue. Children cost money. When parents cannot support their family, they are prone to apply for welfare and other government programs that were put in place to help low-income families. These programs are needed, but the federal government could decrease the need and the cost of these programs if it focused on education and access to contraception. In low-income neighborhoods, people are often not able to access contraception. This takes away lower-income women's autonomy as well as perpetuating the cycle of poverty. If there were more accessible systems in place, these systems (rather than chance) would help families plan for the future, and allow them to decide to have children (rather than chance). In addition, a decreased level of government spending would curb the growth of the debt, which would aid the struggling economy.

A woman rarely thinks to herself, "I'd like to have an abortion instead of using contraceptives this time." That is lunatic. Abortions happen out of necessity. If they were illegal or severely restricted, women would still get them, but the procedures would be unsafe and deadly. If members of Congress truly want to protect the unborn and create a diminished welfare-dependent state, they must focus on education and accessibility; this strategy will also lower government spending in the long run.

Instead of going backwards, the United States should be moving forwards. Members of Congress must recognize that women have an inalienable right to privacy with regard to their bodies, a right that we should not have to fight for. Education and access to contraceptives needs to be more widespread, thereby improving our dire economic situation and our quality of life.

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2013, America has had quite a year, with many ups and downs. Everything from the government shutdown, to what I'd call: an official economic recovery. We have witnessed a terrible civil war in Syria where tremendous bloodshed has occurred. America has hosted many natural disasters too, everything from intensely cold temperatures to violent tornadoes. In these tragic times America has stepped up its game and delivered, helping our neighbors when they are struggling. This is the America that our allies look up to: the friendly, hospitable, welcoming America that we all contribute to every single day. Let's keep that good, positive America in our hearts this year.

Eleven million people are in America illegally. These people have come to this great nation in search of a better life. These people are trying to achieve the American dream. Immigrants are trying to send money home to their family in another country, some are trying to provide for their family here in the US. All the while they are constantly worried that our government will deport them back to their home country. This is not right, it's not okay that we don't welcome them into our nation. I want the path to citizenship easier for them so that they can get what they wanted to get by coming here. Let's be a bit more hospitable to people who are just trying to help their family.

Our status on the issue of the environment is not looking up. America has the great opportunity to help lead the fight against climate change. America must set high standards concerning the environment so that other countries will follow to help reduce the risk of the world's surface covered in water. Inside America to confront this issue head on we need to educate Americans on what is okay and not okay to recycle and how to compost or break down food into soil for our farms and gardens. This is a plan that will work and that we must initiate this year.

Our country is very behind on a major issue. America's education system is well behind many other well developed global powers. We need to fix that issue from the bottom up starting in our pre and elementary schools, with more emphasis on math and science. At higher levels, more affordable college and university opportunities for the lower and middle-class. We need to invest more time and education in our education and we need to do it now!

All of these ideas I am proposing are simple and should be easy to carry out with a bit of willingness from both parties. I am not asking to overhaul anything just some easy doable requests that all of us can help to accomplish. America should look to the future, to the next generation growing into adulthood. Let's get back on track for these young men and women who have high hopes for themselves and their country.

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The United States of America is an amazing country to call home. However, in the modern day we as a nation face problems that challenge our ingenuity and integrity. The world today is one of war, whether that is physical, or political. We struggle to find resources to continue on living the way we have for as long as we can remember, yet forget that the earth which we walk on is a fragile one. The United States is no exception. We often find ourselves between a rock and a hard place; dealing with complex issues such as health care for all, or additional billions of dollars in debt; the Continuation of fighting a war which is not ours, or withdrawing our troops and allowing innocent people to face an uncertain future. Spend billions in foreign oil to keep companies in business, or convert to clean energy and watch the economy crumble. The list of hard choices goes on and on. The reality is, we no longer live in a time when decisions are cut and dry and each decision resonates into our future with force.

As a nation, we face an increasingly unpredictable future, and without reassurance of our outcome, fear can cause bitterness and ignorance. Education, the economy, politics, and the fate of an ever-changing climate put an enormous amount of stress on us as people. There is no certain cure for the issues we deal with as a nation, but the first step towards a solution is unification. As a country, it's time that we put aside our grudges, opinions, and preferences and work as a whole to support America's path towards growth, safety, security and stability. The United States of America has been a country that others look to as a role model and to some as a beacon of freedom and safety. We have more than ourselves to work for; there are millions of people around the world who rely on our help and support. We need to shed the selfish shells, and work as a people, not as a political party or organization. Whether you are a Republican, Democrat, or Libertarian it doesn't matter, because America is your home, and at the end of the day we all have to learn to coexist and benefit from each other's support. This is how we will help to secure America's future, America's education, industry and healthcare. Unification is the first step towards solution.

If we need reminding of the impact of dissention and fracturing of our political system, the Civil War looms in the hearts and from the pages of our history, when compromise not only failed, but conversation stopped. The State of the Nation in America is painful obvious even to the young people and the children. If we don't remember how to talk to each other, work together and accomplish the majority rule established as a framework in the US Constitution, we stand to lose more than a budget. We stand to lose our democracy.

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## BRIBES FROM FAST FOOD: A STATE OF CORRUPTION

In the year 2014, the union is majorly corrupt; the country is run by a capitalist nightmare of over-powerful healthcare, tobacco, and food industries. From their very beginnings at the turn of twentieth century, the fast food industry has steadily become more and more powerful and influential. Spawning from this growth in influence, the union has steadily declined into a state of corruption at the hands of the fast food industry, with these major food chains bribing government workers in high positions.

Government agencies controlling food, such as the FDA, USDA, and EPA may have been created with good intentions, but when a higher-up does not believe they are being paid enough money for their job, they are known to be tempted to accept bribes and submit to being the puppets of fast food corporations, looking to exploit their power to lower the standards of their products. An article on [NATURALNEWS.COM](http://NATURALNEWS.COM) explained how, in a survey given to workers at the FDA and USDA, one fourth of the survey takers admitted to having changed policies for corporate gain. On one hand this is not morally right both in the way that our government officials- who were elected by the people- are accepting bribes, and also that they are changing policies allowing even less healthy food that causes diseases- more money to health care; another corrupt industry in the United States.

Corrupt FDA, USDA, and EPA fat-cats obviously do not want to break their ties with fast food puppeteers; this brings more corruption directly into the government organizations themselves. In the [NATURALNEWS.COM](http://NATURALNEWS.COM) article the writer explains that many innocent workers at organizations like the FDA and USDA are demoted or even fired for trying to do their job and not keeping their mouths shut about corruption they have witnessed. The higher-ups in charge of these huge organizations influence immoral decisions that bring dirty money to their own pockets; they change state standards to very low standards and do not require food companies to tell customers when the food was made, processed or cooked.

Despite all this- mostly widely known information- this corruption is still going on and growing. According to [FASTFOODNATIONHONORSPROJECT.WEEBLY.COM](http://FASTFOODNATIONHONORSPROJECT.WEEBLY.COM) ties between congress and fast food are too strong to vote against certain policies. This means that the way to lower corruption in the food industry would have to be to take direct action.

Despite knowledge of corruption being well known in America- Supersize Me is a mainstream movie- there is not very much motivation to stop bribes from the food industry. This is a problem that should not only be addressed, but worked towards solving as well.

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My fellow Americans, I stand here before you to evaluate the state of our great nation. Over the past year our economy has risen as the Gross National Product increased 4.1% in the third quarter, and the National Deficit went down \$1.8 Billion. As of November, the national unemployment rate has dropped to 7% and personal income has risen, proving that our nation is moving out of the recession, and America is once again becoming a nation of economic growth and wealth.

2013 saw an increase in revolutions around the world, from Syria to Egypt, many countries around the world are experiencing the same revolution the United States and our ancestors endured in order to gain our individual freedoms. Through the government and all of our national forces, we must work together to give aid in the form of resources and money, to assist the new governments that are the result of these revolutions, and ensure that there is smooth turnover of power. The United States must also create a coalition of our allies, along with the United Nations, to create an agreement that delegates the responsibilities and costs of helping these nations form new governments, and ensures that the re-created states are not intruding on an individual's human rights.

The production of Genetically Modified Organisms, GMOs, that are then placed in processed foods or on crops and used as an insecticide, have created a serious health risk for myself, and all my fellow Americans. It has been proven that GMOs can lead to serious health issues and impose high health risks. We must work together with the agricultural farmers and corporations that use GMO's to research the other options that these businesses have in order to ensure plant safety, without endangering the public health at the same time. Then we must create a grant program that would give states and localities money to allocate to farmers and organizations that agree to not use GMOs. For companies that still use GMOs, we must toughen the regulations on the use of them, through only allowing a regulated amount to be present in foods, and make it mandatory that this presence is labeled on every package of a product.

Educated masses lead to innovations and improvements in every aspect of life. Currently, around 30% of Americans have obtained a college degree. In order to have an educated citizenry, we need to make federal aid for students planning on going to college more available. To do this, we need to restructure the system that is used to disperse federal financial aid. If we create a formula, based on family income, and reduce the importance and use of merit based scholarships, while increasing the use of incentive programs, then allocate the money based on this system, we could effectively make financial aid more available and abundant, and therefore increase the percentage of Americans who have a college degree, creating an educated citizenry. Thank you, God Bless America.

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I can't claim to know a lot about politics. In fact, I make a point to stay as uninvolved in it as possible. In a nutshell, all I know is that Obama is our president, and that I should never bring up politics with my grandfather, unless I'm willing to spend the next three or four hours listening to him denounce every decision our government has made since the 1920's. When our class was told we had to write this essay, my first thought was, "I have no idea what the state of our union is. How am I supposed to write about how to fix it?"

I'd bet that every single other student in my classroom was having the same thought, save the one or two kids that are really into politics, and, as we all know, are going to win this competition. This got me thinking, and I've come to a conclusion. The problem with our country is that not enough young people know what the problem is. Ironical, isn't it?

When I think of our government, I think of old white men. Now, I know this is a very stereotypical generalization that I'm making. Women are getting involved, and hey, our president is black. We seem to be doing better, based on the limited information that I have. But, whether they're diverse or not, the people making decisions for our country are old. This isn't entirely a bad thing; older people have more experience, confidence, and knowledge. All I'm saying is that that wisdom needs to be balanced with the fresh perspectives of our country's younger generations. Younger people need to start getting more excited about politics, myself included. We need to start looking at it as an exciting opportunity to change what we think should be changed, instead of as a boring subject that our uncles argue about over Thanksgiving dinner. Now, I know there are probably many kids out there that are interested in politics. That's great, but I also know that the vast majority of kids, like myself, are simply uninterested. The solution lies with us, and we need to motivate ourselves. It can't come from the adults.

If this essay somehow makes it to anyone important, please don't take this as a sign that you need to launch a national "Politics are Cool, Yo!" campaign. It won't work. It needs to be started by the kids. We need to start clubs, be in our school governments, or even just watch the news. I don't have a perfect solution, seeing as I am, for now, one of the aforementioned uninterested students. But, I know this: If politics can become more accessible to young people in any way, shape, or form, we will take notice, and, eventually, get involved. It's our country too. We want to be just as involved as Grandpa Bill and Senator Sanders. One of us just needs to lead the way.

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It is a great privilege to be a citizen of the United States. As citizens, we have a responsibility to ensure that our government is used to improve lives. Although this country has achieved much, there are many aspects that can be improved. In particular, we need to work towards reducing the unemployment rate and take meaningful steps to stop climate change. Addressing these two issues now will go a long way towards helping current and future generations.

The unemployment rate is at seven percent. It is our obligation, as a nation, to lower this rate. By lowering the unemployment rate, we could see a drop in crime and a reduction in poverty as more people are earning a steady income. Because of this steady income, there will be more tax revenue which could then support safety net programs that help the impoverished. An increased employment rate will also cause an increased access to health care and other necessities to living, strengthening families and communities.

In order to decrease the unemployment rate, there are things in our country that will need improvement and our support. Affordable childcare can benefit the employment rate, as it allows parents to be free to go to work. Access to higher education is also essential in increasing the employment rate, as more people will be able to obtain higher paying jobs or start businesses that create jobs. Quality public education, especially early childhood education, will build a strong workforce as jobs are created. It is important to acknowledge the small businesses that provide countless jobs and to ensure that the government is giving these businesses the support they need to sustain their existence.

Climate change is a pressing issue the world is now facing and, as the United States, we need to lead the world in a greener direction. Carbon dioxide emissions are growing exponentially and are hurting our environment and our people's health. We need to take meaningful steps to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions and put our energy and resources into renewable energy technologies. Not only will the environment benefit, but we will benefit economically as the prices of energy will be stable and affordable.

These goals may be difficult to achieve; however, the result will benefit the country immensely and place us as a world leader in many aspects. These issues must be addressed, as they will improve the lives of every citizen and will allow us to strengthen our union.

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The rising cost of a college education is becoming a chronic problem for everyone. We want everyone to become a well-educated, informed citizen, but are doing so at a steep price. We are paying an exorbitant amount of money and are being left with large amounts of debt.

For many families, having a high school senior in the household brings mixed feelings towards college. There is the excitement towards experiencing new things, but also the concern for how they will be able to afford a college education. The worries start right at the beginning, before the senior is even accepted. Having just finished my college application, I estimate that I paid about \$600 for application and testing fees. What do these fees do to help with post-secondary education? Nothing. These fees are being used as a gamble for the right to a college education. There is nothing saying that the applicant will be guaranteed admittance to college, only the chance of it. There should be a movement passed that will eliminate all application, testing, and other miscellaneous fees associated with the application process, so students have a chance to apply to the college they want without money to limit them in the pursuit of a higher education.

Even once students have been accepted to a college or university, the tuition should be lowered or subsidized by the government. Pursuing education beyond high school serves to help better society and, in turn, will help us out of the unstable state in which we find ourselves. There are many positive aspects about pursuing education beyond high school, but they are being outweighed by the financial repercussions of the decision to do so. This is not how the system should be run. We should not have to cringe at the word college; we should embrace it because of the plethora of opportunities that it will provide us.

There seems to be a double standard in this country. We want our citizens to pursue a higher education because the country will reap the benefits, yet we still limit the post-secondary education to those that can afford it and not let everyone have the opportunity to a higher education. There needs to be a change, if anything is going to move forward. Therefore, let all fees be eliminated, let there be lower tuition costs, and allow all people a chance for a college education without having to sign over their life in order to get one.

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"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts," said Winston Churchill. Churchill's quote links two controversial issues that our country is now facing, education and unemployment. We have to think about the people in our state and their futures. How will they continue to succeed? If people want to continue seeking jobs, they must go through a schooling process in order for them to feel satisfied. We want to grow strong and protect our views, so, taking control of our future will make it stronger and brighter as a country. We have to start to address these topics first, so they won't become a failure, but a success for our country.

I believe education should be the government's biggest concern because of what it can push our nation to accomplish. We have to make the common core strong, so that students know what to expect. We cannot just give up after a failure, we have to be determined and think more about our future. Marion Brady, who is a classroom teacher, asked, "What knowledge is absolutely essential for every learner?" His question is what we think the curriculum should be to everyone. I believe if any student is strong in a core of truly essential skills, they can succeed in anything they want in their future. I believe enforcing the common core will help achieve our goals and lead to courageous decisions.

Building a successful education program will begin to strengthen the unemployment rate in our country. I think benefits being extended isn't the right solution because there are so many opportunities to go towards to be successful. If the government chooses to extend the benefits, we would be spending billions of dollars in a short amount of time, which would not help our economy. We have to think about what's best for the individual, as well as the whole country. It's best if we continue to persevere by going to a job training facility to be more successful. Making no extensions would lead people to create a successful life on their own, gain confidence, and rely on only themselves. Leading people to search for a job is in their own hands and they need to have courage in order to succeed in life.

To conclude, our country has to continue to grow as a whole in order to solve the controversial issues. Making successful decisions can permanently change the way the country grows. Also, creating a confident country leads to less room for failure in the long run. Let's believe we can create a strong common core plan for education and a non-extendable unemployment plan. I believe it can be done, it just takes time and hard work to get them. Let these two topics not be an issue anymore and finally resolve them, so we all can grow to our best.

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The year 2013 was a period of progress and setback. The government was shut down for sixteen days, the unemployment rate decreased to seven percent, the lowest unemployment rate in five years, The Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) was passed with mixed initial success, and many other influential achievements and failures occurred. A new year is here, and now is the time to further develop 2013's successes and solve its problems. The best way to turn 2014 into a year of achievement is to unite Americans and Congress by offering multiple solutions to common disagreements and by discovering a series of common goals with the support of the entire nation.

One of the catastrophically unsolved problems in 2013 was the gap between Republicans and Democrats in America. The government was shut down from October 1st to October 16th, and it nearly defaulted on its bills during this harsh debt-ceiling debate. This could have been avoided, if multiple choices were offered during these debates. For example, the main reason the Republicans did not want to re-open the government is they strongly opposed the Democratic principle of a government-controlled health insurance system (ObamaCare). One compromise, which could have solved this dilemma, is making ObamaCare optional. This compromise never occurred because the Democrats wanted ObamaCare nationalized with a fine on those who did not enlist and the Republicans wanted complete abolishment. Middle ground must be reached.

Further connecting Congress and America will also help eliminate some of 2013's largest problems. Sometimes Congress is split because each Congressperson is acting on behalf of his or her voters. At other times, such as the government shutdown, Republicans and Democrats disagree on the best ways to solve a problem. If Congress and the White House listened to the public more, then America can help its leaders tackle America's most difficult problems. Utilize Facebook, utilize twitter, utilize easy, accessible websites and conduct multiple surveys concerning many issues the country faces. Have America decide if the debt ceiling should be raised; have America decide if ObamaCare should be mandatory and existent; have America become one of the mediators of public dilemma. Stop having Republicans elect Republicans and Democrats elect Democrats; have Americans elect Americans.

Unification and success can also be created through generating nationally common goals. For example, the issue of clean energy is a project being half-heartedly tackled by the government. Turn 2014 into the year that the United States of America leads the world to a greener Earth. Begin the movement that creates 4.5 million jobs, stimulates the economy, and eliminates 1.2 billion tons of carbon emissions per year by 2030. This single goal can cause America to reap the benefits of economic stimulation, energy-efficiency, and national unification.

It is time for America to raise itself to new heights as a truly united nation. Allowing the public to help its leaders compromise and work on common goals will bring this country together. Now is the time to unite the United States of America. ##

There are many factors that impact our environment. Air pollution, deforestation, and climate change are just a few. These specific problems are caused by humans. We have a responsibility to our planet, ourselves, and to the other species that live here with us. Senator Bernie Sanders should take a stronger stance in protecting the environment because it is important to the state and the world.

Air pollution has a vast effect on climate change and the environment. In 2012 alone, the world produced 9.7 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>Now). All of the carbon emissions that go into the air cause climate change because the atmosphere traps the CO<sub>2</sub>, which causes all the extra heat. The air, in many places, is not very clean because of air pollution and smog. Some factories use green energy so they do not put out as much pollution as other factories.

Deforestation, caused by logging, farming, mining, and development is also another immense problem that needs to be addressed. Rain forests are being cut down at an alarming rate. These rainforests need to be protected. Madagascar has lost 95% of its rainforests. Sumatra only has 15% of its rainforests left. The Atlantic coast of Brazil has lost 90-95% of its rainforest (Mongabay). Rainforests are important because they provide a habitat for plants and animals, they regulate our climate, they help to prevent soil erosion, and they provide a home for indigenous people. Bernie Sanders needs to help protect the forests not just in Vermont, but all around the world.

Different environments around the world are in danger because of climate change. One way that climate change is caused is by carbon emissions. Air pollution causes climate change because when the air is polluted by all the CO<sub>2</sub> that we are producing, it damages the ozone layer. Climate change also affects forests which causes damage to the animal population and their homes. The earth isn't an unlimited supply; we need to use what we have carefully and conscientiously.

Senator Bernie Sanders should take a stronger stance in protecting the environment because climate change, deforestation and air pollution are major problems damaging our environment. These are all environmental issues that have social and economic impacts. We only have one planet and we need to use what we have carefully.

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Barack Obama once said, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." The American dream that many strive for is currently far out of reach for most. Our current economy is in such a dire state that some are even predicting another economic depression. This economic issue is vital to our future as a nation and impacts United States citizens directly. I also fear that if this issue is not addressed before long the consequences may be great. Fossil fuel usage (along with other things) have aided in the increase of unemployment rates in the United States and the poor economy. I believe that if the president were to focus on the state of the economy many other issues in the United States could be addressed as well.

Although I believe that many people blame the state of the economy on an excess of government spending, a huge expenditure of the government is in the subsidization of fossil fuels. Not only are fossil fuels harmful to the environment, but they are extremely costly. With the current economy, many citizens struggle to afford the prices of this resource. Furthermore, the large amount of dependence on fossil fuels leaves this resource an unreachable necessity. It is vital for the president to search for an alternative resource because fossil fuels are currently too costly for average citizens to afford. The president should be focused on finding an alternative resource for fossil fuels to decrease government spending and, in turn, improve the economy.

As a result of a poor economy, citizens are finding it hard to live comfortably and fulfill their ideas of the American dream. Government spending reduces the amount of money the government is able or willing to provide to the unemployed. Theodore Roosevelt said, "Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people." In saying this, Roosevelt infers that the president is not to blame, it is the politicians below him that do not allow him to make change. I believe that the government as a whole should be concerned with the outcome of such a poor economy. For example, jobs are extremely limited, leaving unemployment rates higher than the United States have seen in years. The unemployed are finding it hard to live comfortably on the current unemployment benefits. Therefore, the government, as a whole, should be focused on extending unemployment benefits to those in need. Citizens are suffering because of the poor economy and the government needs to take action to avoid this.

The United States economy must improve the state of our union. Government spending must also decrease to make room for citizens in need of assistance. Without government assistance the citizens turn against their government and grow unhappy. The United States should focus on decreasing government spending to improve the economy because without a stable economy, citizens suffer and the state of the union crumbles.

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Amidst not only our challenges in the past year, but in our progress as well, we as a nation have proved our unity and strength. We have confronted issues, such as gun control and gay marriage and have worked hard to figure out how to best deal with issues like these. We have proved ourselves as pioneers; we have explored the wonders of space and have developed amazing technologies new to the world. I ask the American people, with their strength and their unity, to confront an entirely different issue. One that is so intertwined with our lives and society, yet one that is so ignored. I ask the people to confront a world issue. Today, I ask that each and every individual of this nation to consider the impacts that our society has on the environment.

We as a nation have come to understand that in order to prosper, we need to work, produce, and consume with our earnings. Companies produce goods that are meant to be broken and thrown away so that consumers will simply buy more of their product. I argue that we are smarter. A society that values monetary gain at the demise and destruction of the environment is one that will not last. Without a healthy environment, we cannot have a healthy society. We are too scared to look at the destruction and pollution that we are causing as a society and as a global economic system. I ask what is more fearful, deciding to make progress today or ignoring the issues of tomorrow? Ignoring until there are no longer any issues to worry about, until the Earth itself has perished along with its inhabitants. Now is our gateway and foundation to the future. We must change the way we live in order to live.

The exciting possibility is that we can change. We hold more knowledge and resources than we ever have before. America, it is time that we put the environment first. It is time that we alter the way that we view and interact with the world around us. By 2026, every home needs a solar panel and seventy percent of the buildings we use need to use gray water. And by 2030, seventy-five percent of the transportation industry needs to use bio-fuels. By 2035, seventy percent of vehicles need to be electric and seventy percent of America needs to be powered by clean renewable energy and resources. Dismiss the idea that it cannot be done, that we as a society and the world cannot solve the problems that we have created. And most of all, dismiss the notion that "it is not your problem." The problems are here, they are real, and they are now. This world is our home, let's treat it like one.

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This past year has posed many serious national security and foreign policy challenges for the United States. The nation encountered various issues like the Edward Snowden's NSA leaks, chemical weapons uses in the Syrian civil war, and a government closing. While all of these issues are significant and have captured the headlines of the news media, we must also keep in mind the small issues that can potentially transform into global conflicts.

Currently, for example, one of the seemingly more exotic issues threatening world peace involves the disputed Diaoyu (or Senkaku) Islands in the South China Sea. Although these barren rocks might seem truly worthless, as they are uninhabited and lack natural resources, this fact did not stop China, Japan or South Korea from staking conflicting claims and angrily criticizing each other, escalating a small territorial issue into a potentially larger crisis. While China flaunts its growing dominance in the region, the South Koreans and Japanese reject Beijing's territorial claims.

In my conversations with various Chinese people during my last year studying abroad in Beijing, most people strongly sided with their government's territorial claims. In almost the same breath, they catalogued a long list of grievances from the turbulent history of Sino-Japanese relations. Many still vividly recalled earlier atrocities, such as the "Rape of Nanjing," When Japanese troops stormed Nanjing, raping women and burying people alive.

Chinese authorities play on these popular fears, disseminating propaganda that blames Japan for countless issues. Debates about truly useless ocean rocks, therefore, become conflated with deeply felt passions from the past, which is why it is important to understand the cultural and historical backgrounds of various conflicts in order to resolve them.

Because the situation now brewing in the South China Sea stems from deeply felt cultural and historical origins, the situation is extremely volatile. When the United States flew two bombers over the islands to demonstrate close ties with Japan, we may have raised the level of tension to a still higher level. Following the flights by our bombers, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Koreans all sent planes to fly over the islands, to demonstrate their respective ownership claims over of the islands.

As a nation, if we want to avoid potential wars, the government should consider more peaceful options, such as encouraging negotiations, before sending in war planes. The government must practice more diplomatic conversations with Chinese, Japanese and Korean partners in order to reduce the likelihood of war. Flying war planes over disputed islands never solves issues; it mainly risks causing more tensions.

In sum, to avoid international incidents, the United States must practice a more responsible system of foreign policy. The tension of the East Asian region is only one example of when America used force prior to engaging in other forms of international communication. Instead, the US government must assess historical and cultural

backgrounds of various conflicts and first try to resolve them through peaceful means, rather than skyrocket the likelihood of starting wars.

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